

## Beginnings

by Kat1

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## Beginnings

> <meta name="Generator"> A small smile played over her lips

Title: Beginnings

Author: Kat Hughes

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Rating: PG-13 for (mild) adult language

Summary: Paris and Torres get to know each other.

Disclaimer: Story's mine. The names are all Paramount's.

Archive: ASC and anyone else

Author's Note: This is completely on its own. It's not consistent with Pathways or any other pocket book (Although I lifted "Selva" from the Badlands book.) This is just me, spinning possibilities (as always)

Dedication: Brenda, who I owe completely for this story. For her advice and frankness, this one's for her. I just hope one day Trekdom can steal her back from Farscape J

\* \* \* \* \*

A small smile played over her lips.

Jonas continued. "Fuel injectors. We're not quite sure where they came from. Suder thinks they're Federation spec." He walked forward, leading her into the room and shrugged a little. "Personally I think they're good copies. Just lacking that bit of quality, you know?" He hesitated, tapped his fingers against his leg, bit his bottom lip and looked around the room.

It was the only hold that the Selva had. And there was a large convex dent in the hull to his left; that was what came of being rammed by a Cardassian freighter.

He pointed vaguely. "Oh yeah and over there we've got some power couplings, an old trilitium matrix and some messed up transporter parts, I think they're Romulan, we're not sure. Ermâ€¦" He bit his bottom lip again and ran a hand through his hair, straining to keep his eyes open. This was becoming all too hard to remember.

She walked out of his shadow and into the main part of the hold. A swift kick from her boot sent some debris flying, a piece of Cardassian hull, salvage though, not a scalp.

She turned back to face him, hands by her sides. "And he wants me to do something with this junk?" She asked, it was rhetorical.

"Uh huh." He answered. "He seems to think you're good at Engineering." Jonas attempted half a smile and then added wearily. "Wonder where he got that idea."

"Beats me," the woman returned. "I just get things done." She moved further into the piles of debris, some were so badly charred she could barely tell it used to belong to a ship at all, but then so did a lot of the things they used to patch up Engineering.

Jonas mumbled something and shuffled some scraps into a pile with his boot. The woman noticed this and smiled to herself. "Something funny?" Jonas asked defensively.

"You haven't been here long." She stated simply, nodding to his boots. "Your boots, they're polished." She turned her back on him.

He smiled sheepishly. "New recruit," he said, as though admitting to having an extra head.

Her back was still to him; she crouched and began sifting through a particular pile, systematically searching for something, anything that would give her a start. Her hands were quickly covered in soot. "How many came in?" She asked.

"Three, a week ago." Jonas replied, his hands now deep in his pockets.

"Some week." She commented.

"Yeah." He responded shyly.

It had been one hell of a week. Jonas's side hurt from where sharp fragments of metal had embedded themselves linearly along his thigh muscle. Three Cardassians frigates, the badlands and some hot-shot pilot who he'd not yet had the displeasure of meeting had all led to

Jonas having probably one of the worst weeks in his life. Almost made him wish he was back farming in the DMZ.

She smiled warmly at him. "It'll get better." His first sign that maybe she wasn't as hot-headed as that Bajoran had made out. Seska, now there was a woman. And it was the women and the numerous Maquis bars that had kept Jonas sane, and not contemplating mutiny.

She looked back to him and his forlorn features. She laughed brutally, "When you drop your standards."

Jonas considered this. \_They've already dropped.\_

"If you want anything just shout." And he moved to the hatch.

She grinned. "You really are new."

He spun in the doorway. "Huh?"

"If I need you, you'll know."

"Okay," he said, making as quick an exit as possible.

She sighed. If she didn't know better she'd think Chakotay delighted in torturing her like this. Underneath all this scrap there was something. Chakotay knew that, B'Elanna knew that. It still needed finding though. Finding that B'Elanna would have to do. He was taking advantage of her obsessive tendencies. She'd probably spend the next day and night searching, and he was counting on that.

She picked up half a circuit board. Weighed it in her hands and then threw it to the other end of the room. \_One downâ€|so so many to go.\_

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He strolled easily into Chakotay's office. His hair was dishevelled; he hadn't shaved. Chakotay could smell the alcohol from where he was seated.

Chakotay raised a palm and gave the man a decisive nod. He didn't need him any closer.

Wobbling on his feet the man flashed him a smile as he looked around the Captain's office. "Nice," he said, still grinning, not an ounce of truth in his voice.

Chakotay's mouth pursed a little and his eyes hardened. His fingers beat out a noisy rhythm on his desk. He felt like he was being backed into a corner and he was ready to hit back, hard. All the man had done was walk in, as instructed, and utter one sarcastic comment.

—

\_Already too much, \_Chakotay thought.

He was just another messed up kid, there were many like him, better

acquainted with the bottle than their mothers. Then why did it take all of Chakotay's legendary control to stop him smashing that arrogant little mouth right back into the bulkhead?

He shook his head, the low light casting long shadows.

The man wavered again, putting out both hands to stabilise himself. "Well?" he asked, eyes half open, the word slurred.

"What the hell was that?" Chakotay began. The words were controlled; maybe a little too controlled.

He snorted. "I thought you were a pilot. Where I come from it's called saving your ass."

"We suffered heavy damage," he paused, watching the look in Paris's eyes. "I'll have repair crews working for weeks to fix this." His tone was low and menacing.

"Like I said," he swaggered, "We're here aren't we? That's a lot more than can be said for the Valiant." A sickening smile coloured his features.

Chakotay's fist clenched, his nails dug into his palm.

"Just admit it Chakotay, you need me," he drawled. His eyes now on the row of trinkets that were on the side table. With an uneasy swipe he picked up a feather pendant.

"Value your life Paris?" He asked, deep brown eyes turning black, tone lower than ever.

"Nope," but he placed the object back in its place. "But I wouldn't want to break your necklace Captain."

Chakotay closed his eyes for a long beat, asking for patience. Paris was seeking a reaction. He wouldn't give him the satisfaction.

"Probation, a week." He said quietly.

Paris shot him a look of disgust, covered it quickly.

"No drink, no women." He was solemn.

"Aww but Chakotay, I didn't mean toâ€¦I mean." He neared the table; he even looked a little unsettled. He ran a hand through over long hair.

Chakotay nodded. "I see you breaking it, I make a call home, more specifically your home."

Paris's eyes flashed with recognition, almost admiration. "Dear old Admiral Paris, your son's a drunk Maquis pilot, here's how to find him, just thought you'd like to know, lot's of love, Chakotay?"

"Along those lines." Chakotay said, his voice a little louder.

"Devious Chakotay," he chuckled cruelly, "you're learning."

"Not from you," the Maquis Captain countered.

"Actually, I'd say it was Seska. Nice choice Cap'n, she's got greatâ€¦"

"Paris." He grunted, standing now. "Leave."

Tom just smiled back. "What?"

"You know what Paris. I like these carpets. I don't want your blood staining them."

"Okay, okay." Paris said, innocently holding up his hands. "I get the picture. Geez, Chakotay, lighten up." He spun on his heel and left, faltering a little on his way.

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"Torres!" B'Elanna didn't turn, or even stop to find out who was calling her.

She quickly passed through the tight corridors of the ship, short, interlocking through numerous hatches and kicked in doors. People scurried around her, either standing, talking or pulling on jackets and heading out. Being grounded always brought this level of excitement to the ship, broke a few much needed smiles.

B'Elanna hated it.

"Torres!"

Every night a different bar, a different bar tender to throw them out. Some fine and licensed establishment would always get looted, that self same bartender would wake up with a bloody nose, 3 fingers, or not at all. She'd heard worse, she'd seen worse

She quickened her pace.

This was the edge, people liked to cut loose, she understood that, but she hated being taken along for the ride. When she wanted to cut loose, they'd know.

"Torres!" Geron ran straight into her. She stumbled a little, reached a hand out to stop her fall. It met the slightly corroded metal of the wall.

Geron smiled at her shyly. "Hey Torres." He said, offering a hand to help her up. She jumped up, an indicator that she didn't need his help. He never thought she did, but he was a good Bajoran boy, well raised.

"Geron." She acknowledged, her eyes pinned him. He continued to smile at her. "Leaving?"

He nodded and grinned at her. He held a large bottle up for her inspection. The light shot through it, casting patterns on the rust red wall. "I earned it."

"Have fun." She said, patting him on the shoulder. She prayed Dalby would look after him, he was so young.

He was 10 months younger than B'Elanna.

"Torres." The familiar voice called again. "Were you ever going to stop?" Seska gave B'Elanna a forceful look; she tilted her head to offer Gerron a curt nod. Her attention, eyes dancing, focused on the half Klingon.

B'Elanna shrugged. "I gotta get to the hold."

A young female crewmember knocked into Seska from behind. The Bajoran cursed and spun on her heel, the young female, short with reddish hair scurried away as fast as she could. Risking a look over her shoulder she caught Seska's glare. She didn't dare turn around again.

Seska smiled forcibly, as if to pacify herself. "I thought we'd go out, have some fun." It was simple, but her tone was dropped almost seductively. "I'm sure Gerron would like to join us," she ran a fingernail under his chin, making him lift his head. She moved closer, Gerron swallowed hard, the bottle shook in his hands. "Wouldn't you Gerron?" She purred. The colour from the younger Bajoran's face disappeared. She lingered a little until she was satisfied he was completely under her spell.

Torres observed, half amused at her friend's game, half disgusted. But still she watched, leaning against the corridor, arms crossed, smiling of all things.

With an easy swipe the bottle was gone from Gerron's hands. Seska took a step back and then threw her head back, laughing heartily. "Relax Gerron." She rested her hand on his shoulder.

He opened his mouth. That was his bottle. But Seska had already held it aloft, trying to read the label in the dim light. "Klingon." She smiled thrusting the bottle into Torres' hands. When it passed before him Gerron swiped at it, it was a lacklustre attempt. Seska just lifted it above his own waiting fingers and made sure Torres held it securely. She chuckled and shot Gerron a harsh glare, telling him not to interfere further.

The lights above their heads flashed a little. No one looked up; it was a common occurrence.

"Hmm," Torres said, her eyes fixed on the label. "My Klingon's a little rusty," she admitted and then she grinned. "I may need to take this for further analysis."

Seska laughed at the joke; Gerron just looked forlorn. Torres felt a pang of sympathy. Seska noted his look as well and put her arm around him, squeezing him into a tight one sided embrace. "Gerron, it's okay. Torres and I will take you out. Dalby hasn't got the first clue; we can get you anywhere. Even aboard a Federation ship for the night." Seska winked at Torres. "Believe me, you have not lived until I show you the sights, and Torres, well she isn't bad company either." Seska gave B'Elanna a playful punch in the arm.

Gerron tried a tentative smile. "I think you've won him over."

B'Elanna said triumphantly, still clutching the bottle under her arm. "But I've got to get to the holdâ€|"

"You're not coming with us?" Seska still gripped Gerron tightly.

"No, I gotta work." She lied.

"Ohâ€|" Seska looked a little disheartened.

"But then I thought you'd be staying in tonight," Torres said, grinning conspiratorially. "With Chakotay," her tone was playfully husky.

Seska laughed again, pulling Gerron tighter to her, he tried not to wince audibly although his face told another story. "Chakotay's no fun tonight."

"Oh, and why is that?" Torres asked, her interest peaked, maybe she'd check in on the Captain later if Seska wasn't going to be around.

"Paris." Seska growled, a definite scowl darkening her features.

Torres could understand. She hated mercenaries, they all did.

"Yesterday?" B'Elanna inquired. Referring to the stunt that had nearly broken her neck. She'd been half in and half out of a maintenance hatch trying to stop a plasma coolant leak and at the same time the ship had tilted by about 45 degrees as the inertial dampers gave out. She had the bruises on her upper arms to show for it. Everyone knew Paris, and despised him in equal measure.

Seska nodded, her eyes low, deep in thought. She shook it off and then added. "But I think you'll like this," she lessened her grip of Gerron, leaning into Torres, and he took the opportunity to slip away, not looking back. "Chakotay's got him on probation."

Torres looked quizzical. "And that means?"

"No wine, women or song as Humans would say. Well and truly ship bound." She looked about her, only now noticing Gerron's departure.

"Fitting." B'Elanna commented.

No one onboard knew Paris by reputation. He'd managed, in the short time he'd been aboard, to acquaint himself with everyone, some more intimately than others.

Seska yawned. "So, I can't change your mind?"

B'Elanna shook her head.

"Your loss." The Bajoran pushed past the Engineer; someone in the distance had caught her eye. "Jonas!" She called down the busy corridor.

The man stopped and stared at her, a smile creeping onto his lips. "I ever show you Denari 4?" She asked.

He smiled. "I've been here a week."

"All the more reason. Let me initiate you, the Maquis way." She was gone.

B'Elanna still clutched the bottle; the label read "Sularian Brandy." Maybe tonight wouldn't be wasted after all.

She resumed her stride and set her mind for a long night of work ahead of her.

Maybe she would drop in on Chakotay.

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48, 49, 50, 51

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"Paris!" An angry voice screamed from nearby. He ignored it.

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50? 50? 50? Oh shitâ€¦

—

He'd lost count. This particular game involved counting the number of ventilation holes, messily pushed through an old piece of hull, that was now his door. Well, not just his door, depending on who was still alive, he shared it with three others. All of them men, unfortunately.

"Paris!" Came the distinctly female shrill again.

He sat up this time and swung his legs so they dangled down over his bunk. With a quick push he sailed towards, and then landed heavily upon, the floor.

Linnel Tayar stood in front of him. Her earring reflecting light into his eyes.

"You ready?" She asked nonchalantly.

He looked at her, his mouth quirking into a smile. There was a point, just before becoming completely sober; where your head tried to work itself out again. Even the most lame innuendo seemed amusing.

"I'm always ready." He said deeply, leaning towards her.

She anticipated this and did a quick two-step back. He tried not to let his disappointment show. But that was another thing about being near sober, you can actually remember every rejection. It made sense to him why he never was.



"To go out?" She huffed, hands on hips.

She was at her cutest when she pretended to have control of the situation. She pouted, her nose ridges were more pronounced and her slim build rippled underneath her tight fighting uniform. If he thought hard enough he could just about remember where the zip was, he hoped, for future reference.

"Nope." He said, walking back to his bunk.

"What?" She asked. "What happened to 'Always ready'?" She couldn't repress the smile.

"So, you haven't heard?" He called over his shoulder as he searched for his bag within the single blanket and pillow that he called 'home.' Best one he'd had in a while too.

She walked a little further in and sat on the opposite bunk; Chell's. "Haven't heard what?" She asked, inspecting her nails.

"Daddy's grounded me," he chuckled.

Tayar didn't share the sentiment. She frowned. "Shame," she allowed herself, as unemotional as she could manage.

On finding his bag he pulled out a couple of strips of latinum. "Doesn't mean I can't sneak out." He turned and grinned devilishly at her.

"No, it doesn't." She walked towards him, accentuating her every movement.

He reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of one hand, the other grappled for her hip and he pulled her close to him. He moved his mouth to hers.

She gave him a cool look.

He stopped.

Carefully placing her hand on his she dug her nails in and removed his hand from her waist. She took a step back and licked her lips. "Last I heard I'm out of bounds too, when poor Tommy boy's on probation."

He grumbled and fell backwards with calculated precision, landing squarely on the bunk beneath his own. "You're here to gloat?"

"Yes." She bent towards him. "Remember last time we talked?" She said.

He couldn't. He nodded slowly; no doubt he'd done something unspeakable to the girl.

"You know Paris," she turned away from him and took in the whole tiny bunk room, flaking light green paint on the walls. "I really didn't think Sal was your type."

But he remembered Sal. His mind was a vat of slowly churning

information. The bad stuff lining the bottom, the good stuff floating to the top. The Sal experience was sinking fast though.

"I don't have a type," he said, admitting more in that sentence than he could with any excuse. He wouldn't lie to her; she'd understood the rules, she'd also have to learn to respect them.

"I guessed." She flashed him a decisive smile; she'd come to a decision. "I'm going out." She announced.

"Without me?" He said in feigned astonishment.

"Yeah." She sneered playfully.

She turned on her heel and reached the phaser welded door frame.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He called after her as she strolled through it.

She stuck her head back around the door. "And that leaves?"

He chuckled at her joke. "Not a great deal."

And with that she was gone. Tom restarted his game.

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1, 2, 3, 4

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She waited.

"Come in." She heard faintly and the doors slid away in front of her.

He sat at his desk; the lights were down low.

"B'Elanna?" He asked groggily, only able to see a female shadow against the light that streamed in.

She laughed and stepped forward, the doors closed behind her.

"You woke me." He mumbled.

"Sorry." She wasn't.

"What's this about?" He asked her, following her shadowy form pace in front of the desk.

"This." She'd stopped pacing and a large piece of hardware had been dropped on the worn metal. "I found it." She grinned.

He picked it up and inspected it. Running his fingers over the small nodules and cut circuitry. "What is it?"

She laughed again, too hard. "Chakotay," she cooed, "you really

should get down to Engineering more."

He gave her a harsh stare, she giggled this time. An odd sound coming from her, she was always so controlled; even enraged there was something holding her back.

"B'Elanna," he sighed. "Tell me what it is?" He offered her a weak, fatigue dampened smile.

"That, my friend, is a bio-neural gel pack. These babies just became Starfleet issue, and we've got two. One sitting on your desk and the other in Engineering."

He considered this and held her eyes. He could swear that even under the dark light she was blushing. Again, she didn't seem like the Torres he knew. She was unable to stand still and wriggled nervously as she stood. "Get a seat." He ordered.

She complied. With ease she picked up a large armchair, planted it near Chakotay, and sat down with an over emphasised weary sigh. "So, what do you think?" She smiled and leaned over a bit too far, brushing her hand against his.

"I think they're junk." He said, testing her reaction.

It was one of shock. Her features wavered a little. Her eyes tightening and then relaxing. She stood and delivered her response slowly, so the anger wouldn't show. It came out low, teasing, defiant, reminding Chakotay of a certain Bajoran, not B'Elanna, never B'Elanna, until now. "What?" She asked.

"Our ship doesn't have the systems," he paused, she nodded. "These are as good as scrap metal." He threw the object down and it bounced slightly on loud connection with the table.

She leaned ever closer. "What is it, Chakotay?" There was residual anger in her voice, anger that she was trying desperately to conceal. It was breathy, a slight purr, all clinically timed. Precision, not passion.

He gave her a long and cool look.

"You're not still worried about the \_Valiant\_ are you?" She sat up on his desk and put a hand on his shoulder. "Stop beating yourself up over it."

"No," he sighed again, avoiding her gaze.

"Then what is it? Lonely?" She slowed her movements, making every shift deliberate, every stare hold, every breath obvious.

For a long second he wondered if it was working.

She began to massage the muscles on his shoulder.

"B'Elanna." He said sharply, holding her eyes a moment until she dropped her arm and he looked back down.

It was too much. He'd remembered where he was, who she was.

She sat still for a moment, her fingers knotting.

"B'Elanna, you're acting childish." He had to keep remind himself that that was all she was to him. Her feelings for him were like some misguided crush on a schoolteacher, his for her, wellâ€|they were inconsequential.

"I haven't acted anything Chakotayâ€|you've made that quite clear." She crossed her arms.

"Seska." He said strongly. Not knowing whether it was for her benefit or for his.

"I know." She said. "But since weâ€|you've never evenâ€|never even considered that maybeâ€|" The words wouldn't come properly.

He looked up to her. Watched her lips moving and the words drip slowly out.

"You've been drinking." He said calmly. Knowing she couldn't deny it.

"Do you think I'd be here, like this, if I hadn't?" She spat. And then she reigned it all back in. "I'm leaving."

She hopped off the table and headed for the door; intending never to turn back.

He couldn't let he leave like this.

"B'Elanna." It came out wrong, almost pleading.

She couldn't help it. She turned to face him, something like hope in her eyes.

He shook his head.

Her neck stiffened and she exited the room.

Chakotay hoped she'd forget it in the morning.

B'Elanna hoped he would.

\*\*\*

Tom was disorientated. The ship was unnaturally quiet. He hadn't seen a soul in the last twenty minutes.

And if no one were on board then maybe no one would know if he took a little stroll. Or more than a little stroll, maybe a full jog or even a sprint, hell even the marathon it'd take to get as far from this pile of shit as possible.

In anger he thrust his boot into the wall, he recognised the dull metal sound and almost smiled at the small indent.

How he hated being sober.

\*\*\*

She swallowed hard. Her thoughts blurred.

What had she just done?

She reached the end of the corridor, turned it sharply and headed towards the hold. She didn't want to face Conner in Engineering. She didn't want to face anyone.

She just needed to sober up, alone.

\*\*\*

He leaned back against the wall, considering his options.

He was tired, but couldn't sleep. Too many images, too many suppressed emotions clambering for the surface.

And whether he liked it or not he'd be at the helm of this 'Maquis' ship tomorrow, and the one thing they didn't need was an emotionally unstable screw-up of a pilot. Hold that, wasn't that what they already had?

He looked up to study the flashing light above him. The strip hummed and whirred and flickered on and off. Maybe he could fix it.

He reached an arm up. On contact with the warm plastic he began to pry at it with his fingernails, bringing the other arm for support. Near tiptoes in the corridor at 2300, not the cleverest of his recent ideas.

\*\*\*

She stopped. Her heart beating quick. She could hear something, around the corridor. A scratching of some kind, loud.

Thoughts mixed with alcohol still whirred around her brain. She could feel it still running through her veins, and it took a lot to get a half-Klingon drunk.

Taking a few deep breaths she began to take steady paces towards the source of the sound. Just around the corner.

\*\*\*

Tom realised there was something almost disturbing at the amount of satisfaction he was feeling as he held the removed light guard in his hands.

The loose wires were visible now and the circuitry flashed at him. He snapped a wire and the light stopped flickering, turning a dull grey.

He shivered slightly, and he was used to the cold. The environmental controls had probably blown again.

—

Or I just turned them off by snapping that little wire.

—

Tom sighed; he had never wanted to be an engineer, ever. That walk suddenly sounded like a good idea. But, he reminded himself, the \_Selva\_, with it's battered corridors and homicidal crew may not be 'Home Sweet Home.' But it wasn't out there.

Nothing prepared you for 'Out there.'

And he couldn't lose the feeling that he was being watched. Tom grinned, sober equalled paranoid; or was this the emotionally unstable part?

\*\*\*

"Got you!" She shouted as she pounced around the corner.

Suder, on his knees, sonic spinner in hand was repairing something at the base of the wall. His haunting black eyes were cast in her direction.

She took a deep breath and cursed the adrenaline that pumped around her.

"Torres?" He asked in that malicious yet polite way he had.

"Carry on." She dismissed him.

He nodded and turned back to his work.

She quickened her pace.

She wasn't sure whether he'd hurt her pride or just got her so angry that she needed to kill someone.

Fortunately for Chakotay, he was still in his office, possibly fast asleep, probably with the doors locked.

He knew her too well not to expect the latter emotion.

\*\*\*

Tom rubbed his temples as he thought.

The light needed new parts, and he was never one to leave a job half done.

—

Well maybe that wasn't all trueâ€|.

—

He'd just have to go to the hold.

No one would be there at this time of night. Gods, no one was even on the ship.

People in the Maquis didn't spend their evenings fixing light bulbs.

But then Tom Paris wasn't in the Maquis.

He was a mercenary.

When Tom was younger, studying, or not, for exam after exam at the Academy, he probably would have deemed being a Mercenary 'cool' or something equally naïve and monosyllabic.

It wasn't.

\*\*\*

"Hello?" He called.

She sat, hidden from view, behind a battered piece of bulkhead. It had taken her a while to find the Brandy but she felt strangely better once it sat beside her. She'd also had to sit down on seeing it, to keep her head from spinning.

She didn't want to be noticed.

"Anyone here?" He asked, moving further into the room.

She knew who it was. Which meant that she was going to sit as quietly as she could, and pray he'd go away.

He didn't.

She rested her head against the panel and waited, closing heavy lids.

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If he concentrated hard enough he could just about hear her.

He'd been looking for a small piece of circuit board for the last couple of minutes. To little success. There were a few interesting scraps of metal that would no doubt be finding themselves patching up holes in the next day or two. A variety of Vulcan sensor nodes, that seemed to have no use at all, and that was odd, seeing as they were Vulcan. And at last count he'd found 14 different Bajoran earrings, in different states of disrepair. But no circuit board. And not only the side effect paranoia of being Starfleet trained, but the knowledge that he was being watched to aid his exploration.

Tom's stomach lurched. Today was a good day to die.

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It was becoming irritating now.

He'd start on a pile, sift through it a little, throw something, chuckle approvingly as it clattered against the wall. And then start again.

He'd been doing this for the last ten minutes.

And if he did it again she was seriously considering snapping him in half.

She heard a familiar hum.

—

\_No, please not the sonic inverter.\_ \_Kahless, no.\_

--

She would never admit it. But she often treated her tools and her engines better than most of the crew. Sometimes it was easier relating to inanimate objects; in fact it was always easier, especially with this crew.

She'd found the sonic inverter about an hour ago. She guessed it was Ktarian in design. But something she couldn't quite pinpoint had put her in Chakotay's office, acting like a Denarian whore, when she should have been cataloguing the haul. That being the reason it was now in the intruder's hands, facing imminent destruction.

Taking a minute to clear her thoughts she tried to stand. Which, partially inebriated, she discovered was a little more difficult than usual.

On her fourth try her legs held.

And she became B'Elanna Torres, protector of innocent tools from permanently incompetent Humans.

Which only made her think of Chakotay.

Which only made her wince.

\*\*\*

It had been a stroke of brilliance on his part.

He'd known she wouldn't be able to stand it. And even if it normally took a lot less than holding a tool to ransom to get women to pay attention to him. This was just as satisfying.

There was something different about her. Her hair was a little dishevelled, and he could swear she was swaying slightly.

And it seemed to take her a whole month to get her words out.

He recalled, dimly, her words to him on his arrival.

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2 weeks previous

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"And this is Engineering." Henley said, with a total lack of enthusiasm.

"Oh," was all he could think of as a reply.



"Suder, Chell, Conner over there. Wave boys." Not one even acknowledged her call. "Men." She shrugged.

She led him around a corner. "Warp engines. I hope you remember what they look like." She'd adopted the tone of a Risan tourist bureau representative. "But, I really doubt you'll be spending much time in here."

"I like to be prepared." He said, because he really couldn't think of anything better.

"I guessed." She called over her shoulder. "Over here we have the delectable B'Elanna Torres. I'm sure she'll be pleased to make your acquaintance."

He should have noticed, the look in Henley's eyes said it all. Still, a little dazed and confused from the events of the last few days he stumbled forward.

She had her back to him. On tapping her shoulder she turned violently. "Charmed I'm sure." He drawled giving her his best shot at a full, utterly convincing smile.

She pushed him away from her. "PtaQ!" She spat, shaking the feeling of his touch from her shoulder. He stumbled a little and eventually came to rest on the far wall. "Henley," she growled, "is this all we can do for recruits? I didn't think we'd got as low as bacteria yet." Her eyes were still harshly narrowed at him.

Henley was a little back from the fracas, her arms crossed, smiling. "Oh you haven't heard the best of it. This is Federation cashiered, Admiralty lineage, drunken bacteria. Not to mention murderer, thiefâ€¦"

He sneered at her. "Thanks."

She shrugged. "It's all true." A wicked smile. "And that's what makes it so good."

Torres looked above her. A vain attempt at calming herself down. And then almost

nonchalantly. "Well, have a mercifully short life."

He took a step towards her, she held her ground.

"Oh don't worry," he countered, "I intend to make the most of it." He held her gaze for a long moment. And then she spun away from him, grumbling something under her breath.

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Present Time

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"I don't want to hurt you." She said at last.

"Butâ€|?" He was stood near exactly opposite her. Separated by about 15 metres and god-knows-how-many piles of junk.

"Iâ€|" she searched for the word, "will." Rubbing her temples she then looked a little puzzled at the simplicity of the statement.

"What?" He asked. If it was possible she looked even more confused. He decided to help her out. "I was simply askingâ€|"

"I know what you were asking!" She snapped.

"Okay." He slurred, taking a step back. "No need toâ€|"

"bite your head off?" She interrupted.

"As a matter of fact, yes." He was caught off guard for a moment, surprised of all things.

"Humans," she sighed, "no imagination."

He flashed her the trademark grin. A thousand words or silence, she could take her pick. "I wouldn't go that far. What aboutâ€|?"

"Please," she gave him a tired look and slumped down to sit, perched on something that looked like runabout hull. "Don't tell me about Zephram Cochrane and the, the theâ€|name of that ship thing."

"The Phoenix?" He smiled smugly.

"Yeah."

A silence descended. She seemed to have forgotten why exactly she was threatening him. And for once in his life he seemed to have no idea what to say.

"Soâ€|" he stretched the word as far as it would go; hoping it'd give him the time to think of a suitable ending. "What leaves you here? I would have thought you'd have gone out, not stayed here withâ€|"

"Chakotay." She finished his sentence again.

"I was going to say me."

"Oh believe me Paris, I'm not here because you're here." She said, effortlessly holding his gaze, completely in control, he wondered how she did that, few could.

"But you're still here." He noted, unable to wipe the grin from his face.

She scowled at him, a little shakily, from her safe distance. "Actually, I was here first."

He looked at his boots and nodded, "Good point." With a swift kick a piece of hull flew someway across the hold, an idea came to him. "But you could always leave." He graced her with a mischievous grin.

She seemed to frown, which was a more subdued response than he was expecting. "That would take some effort." She admitted.

"I could help?" He asked, still grinning at her.

She smiled back. Unexpected, he knew little of her, but still unexpected. "I suppose you could," she returned, and he could swear she'd dropped her tone a little.

He looked up to her; she seemed to giggle a little at the confusion in his eyes. She made sure of the smile and nodded carefully to him.

He began to make his way across the mounds of salvage, unsure of what he'd find when he reached his destination.

She watched his journey, unsure of why she was doing this. In fact unsure of exactly what she was doing.

He fell heavily.

A large piece of burned out metal hadn't been as easy to manoeuvre as he thought. There was something faintly ironic about that. He cursed loudly, rubbed the affected side vigorously and failed to take the five or six steps it would take him to reach her.

"Are you okay?" She asked absently.

He caught her eye. "I didn't think you cared."

She rolled her eyes at him a little, seemingly disappointed. "Come on Paris," she coaxed, "thought you could do better than this."

"Better?" His eyes narrowed.

"In fact," she began, the alcohol talking when it shouldn't be, "I expected you to be a lot better. People talk, Tom." She emphasised his name with precision.

"Do they?" He still held his side a little, but more out of shock than anything else. "I wouldn't have thought you'd have listened." A pause. "B'Elanna." He returned her the compliment as he elongated the syllables of her name, letting them trip off his tongue.

"Normally," she nodded to him, somehow expecting him to understand. "I wouldn't, but they talk about you a lot, Tom. More than a lot."

He stopped smiling, and sat on the bulkhead he was near, taking a long weary breath. "Tell me?" He asked, something oddly sincere about his tone, his eyes held low. He ran his fingers around his jacket cuff, picking at strands of loose thread.

"You want to know?" Now it was her turn to be surprised.

He didn't hold her gaze, just chuckled a little to himself, quietly. "I suppose I'm a glutton for punishment."

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"More!" Seska grinned.

Music blared around the dimly lit bar. There were Maquis littered throughout. Talking, laughing, drinking. But who could tell? Each was stealthily hidden from view, the way the Maquis had taught them.

Denari 4 was a trading moon. A series of bio-domes and an orbiting station. It had a transient population of roughly 300, 000. No one lived there. Save the bar owners, the few in self-enforced exile, hiding from the Universe and those still saving for the transport fare away.

But none of this mattered to Michael Jonas.

She was intoxicating. Quite possibly the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. He couldn't take his eyes off her for a moment, and sometimes, it seemed she returned the sentiment.

Her hair was down around her shoulders. She gripped a glass in her right hand that was lazily stretched along the back of the chair. Her other arm was loosely draped around him.

Whatever he said, be it intentionally amusing or not, she would smile at, giggle, respond to in some way. It was more than flattering it wasâ€|

"Waiter!" Jonas barked, catching the attention of the passing barman. The tall dark figure of a man stopped dead in front of their table. He grunted something incomprehensible at them, a prompt.

Jonas cast a look at Seska. She nodded slowly. "Two more of the same."

The bartender gave the man a long look, before grunting again and producing a dark bottle. It was quickly distributed into two glasses, also produced from the bartender's cloak. With a turn on his heel and another short grunt the man moved away, returning to the shadows of the bar.

She giggled. "You know what I like about you, Mikey?" She leaned closer to him, he could feel warm, faintly alcoholic breath on his ear lobe.

"What?" he asked, playfully childlike, grinning, but keeping his eyes forward as she neared.

"You know how to treat a lady." She whispered. Running a long nail down the side of his face.

He shivered a little, her other hand now toying with his hair. "Promise me something?" She asked. As she talked her lips brushed against his cheekbone.

He closed both eyes and nodded, swallowing hard. The only movements he seemed able to manage.

She continued to whisper. "Necessity makes people do things to survive. Crossing lines to avoid detection. Lying to people around

them. A deception, of sorts."

Again he barely managed a slight tilt of his head.

He felt like the only person in the room.

"But you'll never judge me. Will you?" She moved her face away from his, nudging his jaw with her hand, forcing him to look at her.

"Nâ€|nâ€|no," he stuttered.

"Good." She moved her hands away and he could hear her slide down a little along the synthetic leather. Turning he noticed her sitting noticeably away from him, nonchalantly running a hand through her hair.

"Seska?" He queried, unable to help his eyes turning dark and accusing. He didn't like to be teased.

She reached out a hand to clasp his, her eyes pinning him. "Relax Mike."

He attempted a weak smile. She reached for a glass, watched the liquid swirl around it, ran a nail along its rim. "One day," she still didn't look at him, "I'll remember you."

"Wâ€|wâ€|what?" He asked.

She shook her head a little, still staring at the glass. "Nothing." She shot a look up at him, registering his broad smile. "Tell me about your sister."

He may have been naÃ~ve, but he wasn't stupid.

He didn't know it yet, but three drinks in the Denari Starburst bar was about to shape his life.

She laughed at another joke.

For the moment he was happy to bask in his ignorance.

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"They said that?" Laughing, blue eyes dancing at her.

"Why?" She asked, leaning back a little. "It's not true?" She shot him a knowing gaze.

"In a wordâ€|" he held the dramatic pause. "No."

They'd been talking now for 10 minutes, maybe more. But then neither seemed to register the time. Innuendo had been dropped a while back in favour of talking about, of all things, the academy. Still, he'd done most of the talking. Telling her about what she'd missed, what he missed, often divulging more than he meant to and dropping off mid sentence. And when he'd said more than he needed to say, or she needed to hear, it'd be cloaked in a joke, or a feeble change of subject. Consequently he seemed to have talked about some bar in Marseilles more times than was necessary.

"Oh, but I liked that one." Again she giggled. She was drunk and she knew it. The room seemed to rotate around her. The back of her throat was dry and she seemed to have adopted this laugh that seemed lost in large half Klingon lungs.

But unlike the fool in Chakotay's office, she was aware of who she was. And when she reviewed the last hour in her mind, painfully aware.

"You see," he began. "There was a time when I used to give a shit about stuff like this. About what people thought of me." His tone should have been strong; instead it betrayed his lack of confidence in that statement.

Her brow lowered, unbelieving. "And now you don't?"

"Nope."

"So, why did you ask?" She was determined to drive him around in a circle.

"I like to be ahead of the game." He said, his face still holding its smirk. There was something different in the eyes.

"But you just saidâ€¦"

"I said I didn't care. But Tom Paris of all people should be aware of the power of reputation, don't you think?" He'd won and he knew it.

She wriggled a little as she sat, suddenly uncomfortable. Things weren't so friendly now. She snorted, "It's not like you don't use it for all it's worth. It's how you got here."

He nodded. "True."

She continued to assume, enjoying her game. "But then again, it's not like you want to be here. One more pay and you're gone. Maybe you'll settle down. Somewhere suitably anonymous, of course."

"Of course," he mocked.

She continued, undeterred. "Flying. Just like you always wanted to."

He nodded his head, in half agreement. Hands clasped between his legs. "Nice dream, Torres."

"Your dream." She affirmed; she'd changed the rules but the game continued.

"You don't know me." His tone was almost menacing.

"But I know who you think you are." She returned; her tone just as hostile. And to push her point home, "and I know what you've done."

To his credit he showed no emotion, but the smile dropped. It was a selfish pursuit, one she only entertained to make herself feel

better.

But she couldn't drop it now. He couldn't win.

"I thought you didn't pay that much attention to hearsay." His features were still harshly set, a taunting smile reshaping his mouth.

"I lied." She said coolly, matching him every step of the way.

"So, what do I do Torres?" He jeered. "What's your professional opinion?"

"If I was you, I'd get myself back to Earth before some Federation officer makes you a deal you just can't refuse." The words were delivered slowly, for maximum effect.

"You think I'll betray you?" His brow knitted a little, and he hadn't meant it as a question.

Her neck stiffened again. Wide blue eyes met hers. Soot darkened hands shook a little. For a moment there he'd looked as vulnerable as she felt. It was fleeting. The wall was rebuilt. She wondered if she did that. She shook her head a little; there were too many parallels.

"I know you'll betray me," she realised what she'd said, "I mean us."

He gave her a long look, his eyes seemingly taking in every detail of her face. It was the most intense of stares. She doubted if he even knew he was looking at her.

Something broke his concentration. Her final words sunk in.

He couldn't help the smirk.

"You know what I meant." She said defiantly, suddenly breathing easier.

"Loud and clear." But the grin remained.

Eventually her scowl turned into a reluctant smile, and she herself wondered how it'd ever got so serious. She wondered why she was bothered. He'd been easy prey, of all things she shouldn't be feeling guilty.

"I suppose I'll just have to prove you wrong." He said lightly, but he meant every word, or so it seemed.

"I'm never wrong." She crossed her arms.

"What about Chakotay?" He raised an eyebrow.

Her mouth opened, words failed to come.

He stood and made his way to her, shaking his head. "Never mind." He said. Catching her forcible glare. "Forget I ever said it. How about, you don't go conjuring up any life histories for me and I'll stop making observations about your personal life. Deal?" He stood next to

her, his head tilted as he waited for her response.

She nodded; heavily he sat down next to her. "And how about you give me some of that Sularian Brandy you're hiding."

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His pace was quick along the corridor.

His thoughts had moved in circles.

First he was angry at himself for leading her on, which he must have done, otherwise the whole little debacle of over an hour and a half previous wouldn't have happened. Logic dictated that he must have smiled at her a little too often, been too tactile, words of praise coming out as something more. Quite obviously his fault.

But then his thoughts had turned. Crushes were common in the Fleet. Surely, that was also true on the other side of the law. Young Ensigns had them on Commanders almost constantly, they were rectified, put right with regulations and rules and quiet personnel 'chats'. Psychological studies showed that young, insecure women often developed a trust in older men that they saw as desire and acted upon.

But then B'Elanna was always too clever for that.

And when she'd smiled at him he couldn't help but wonder about what ifs, the what-might-have-been's.

Which showed, plainly, that he too was entertaining an infatuation. Which meant his body language must have hinted at it. Which again made the whole mess his despicable fault.

And then somewhere along the line he'd ended up blaming Seska. For a fight they'd had earlier, a fight that had her in some bar with some new recruit rather than with him, leaving B'Elanna opportunity to act, or not to act as it turned out.

And somewhere along the line he'd begun to think only of Seska. The way at times she was so honest, so open with him and then the times she managed to manipulate him, trick him into decisions he didn't want to make. Her emotional pull such that some of his objectivity leaked away every time he looked into rich Bajoran eyes. A fact that made her doubly dangerous. A fact that made him hate himself every time he succumbed.

He often wondered if that was what made it more exciting.

"Hey Captain." Conner greeted him with a wave and a smile.

Chakotay nodded back. Loneliness had an odd effect on people. Conner was normally a little more reserved.

"Conner." He greeted him. "Seen B'Elanna?"

Chell approached from behind Chakotay. "Captain, nice to see you." Chell slapped him heartily on the back.

Chakotay recoiled a little at the touch and then straightened his



back.

There was a noticeable pause.

Chakotay decided to try again. "I was wondering if you'd seen Torres?"

"Oh right." Chell nodded.

"Uh huh." Conner said.

Another silence.

Chakotay's eyes hardened. "I'd like to know if you've seen her recently."

"Oh," Chell blinked, "so you want specifics?"

"That would be nice, yes." Chakotay said with as much condescension as he could manage, still keeping the command edge intact.

"Nope." Conner answered.

"Not a peep." Chell smiled. "But—" Chell seemed lost in thought, and then just a little lost in general.

"But?" Chakotay prompted, unable to keep the impatience from his voice.

Conner jabbed Chell in the shoulder. It was enough to bring the Bolian back to the conversation.

"Suder says he saw her." Chell said quickly before bowing his head a little, it seemed to Chakotay he was trying to stop from laughing.

Conner grinned inanely. "He says she was high-tailing it down the corridor from your office. Suder said she was thinking some pretty interesting thoughts—"

"Oh really?" Chakotay said, without a hint of interest in his voice. His patience wearing too thin.

"Anything you need to tell Seska, Cap'n?" Chell seemed to ask his boots, unable to look up.

Conner seemed to find it just as amusing, and sniggered behind his hand.

"I don't think there's anything I need to tell Seska. Do you, Chell?" The words were asked in an angry whisper. Chakotay had taken an invasive step forward, looming over the squat blue alien.

"No no no sir." Chell eventually got out.

Conner and Chell exchanged accusing looks, each blaming the other for pushing the Captain too far.

Chakotay turned on his heel to leave.

"B'Elanna's in the hold sir." Conner called.

Chakotay didn't even acknowledge him and rounded the corner out of the room.

When he was out of sight. Conner and Chell's silent argument became very audible.

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"Potent." Was his only comment as he took his third swig of the Brandy.

"I wondered." She nodded.

They sat side by side. Lights in the hold were low. Only now did she really see him. His hair was a little too long and was curling at the ends. Day old stubble on his chin. Handsome underneath it all, if you like that kind of thing. Nothing like Chakotay, and that was almost comforting.

"How did you join?" He asked, pushing the bottle back into her hands. His hands brushing hers, lingering a little too long.

She lifted the bottle to her lips. Taking a long drink, just to match him. She could barely taste it anymore. The alcohol stung her lips. She decided to answer his question.

"He saved my life."

"He, Chakotay?" He asked her, although his eyes were fixed on the hatch to the hold.

"Yeah." She said. The memory was easy to recall.

"Is that why youâ€¦" He began, still looking away from her.

"No." She said. And then to her own surprise added, "It's more than that."

"Hmm," his eyes seemed to narrow. "So, what's so wrong with you then? Why are you here with me?" And for the last sentence he turned his head to stare at her. He smiled at her wryly. But she wondered where his thoughts really were.

An alcohol-fuelled haze had descended. She seemed to have little control over her actions or her words. She noticed his hand near her knee and didn't flinch. "I don't know. There's nothing wrong with me, is there?" She matched his stare.

His tone grew quiet. "Oh no, nothing at all." He moved a little closer to her.

She smiled back, eyes low at him. "I think you have no idea what you're doing."

He grinned back but remained close to her. "I haveâ€¦some idea."

"Well then," she said, although there was something a little callous

in her eyes, "that makes two of us."

Her heart beat loudly in her chest. Her bottom lip trembled a little. She tried, in vain, to regulate her breathing.

They were nothing but centimetres apart. Her eyes searched his. He brought a hand up and ran it along her cheekbone.

Her breath caught.

His eyes met hers again. Watching, waiting. He was more hesitant than she expected.

No, he was nothing she expected.

The tips of his fingers still lingered next to her skin. He moved them slightly higher. Gently a finger touched a forehead ridge. She swallowed hard but didn't flinch.

His eyes followed his hand, gently tracing the one part of her anatomy that she'd always hated.

He finished and looked back to her again. He wasn't going to push her, it was her move to make.

With a slightly trembling hand she moved a strand of hair away from his eyes.

He grinned at that. She nodded to him and he closed the gap. So very close.

He closed his eyes, the hesitation was noticeable. He opened them and scanned her confused eyes. "No." He breathed.

She moved her head away slowly. "Why?" She asked, eyes downcast.

"I complicate things." He'd moved back but still watched her.

"Maybe I want things complicated." She shot him a look, something forceful in her eyes.

"You don't want me."

For a long moment she thought she did.

"Torres!" Chakotay, the sound came from a distance. He was not yet in view.

Paris turned to grin at her. "Well that's my cue." He stood.

He made for the hatch. She watched his back.

Chakotay met Paris on his way in. The Captain cast him a sharp look but his thoughts were with Torres. He didn't even see the small nod that Paris gave her before he turned and left the hold.

"Torres." She looked up at him. "We need to talk." She nodded.

They talked. They decided that nothing could ever happen between them. Torres agreed it was just a crush, a silly infatuation.

Chakotay affirmed, and re-affirmed that he felt nothing but friendship for her. B'Elanna nodded and said very little throughout the rehearsed speech. Her head still spun and her thoughts were elsewhere. Far from Chakotay.

Weeks passed. Nothing happened. She saw him occasionally. Heard of him most definitely. She told herself she didn't care.

And then he betrayed them all. She thought she could never forgive him. Of course, she didn't know everything.

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9 months later

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Her whole body ached. For half a second she felt like giving up, dying in a tunnel with some greener than green Starfleet Ensign. There were worse ways to go. The lesion on her neck itched uncontrollably. She felt faintly ill.

Harry Kim gave her a warm smile. She hoped that she'd be rescued. Put back on the Selva and then able to use that array thing to get them all home. And maybe, just maybe she could convince her new Starfleet friend not to throw her in his ship's brig as soon as they were back in the Alpha Quadrant. Provided of course that they ever got there.

They struggled onwards.

And then Harry saw something coming down the tunnel. Three figures. One tall, two noticeably smaller, all running and calling.

Harry seemed to recognise one of them and he smiled.

"Took you long enough," he called.

B'Elanna still couldn't see properly. A young woman, she recognised as Ocampo helped her to her feet.

Harry's friend replied as he hauled him to his feet. "How could I let down the only friend I've got?"

She couldn't be sure but that voice sounded familiar. The blonde Ocampo asked her if she was okay, B'Elanna nodded slowly.

Then she caught a glimpse of him. Two blue eyes straight at her. It had thrown her at first, the uniform, shorter hair. Slightly different smell, due to the lack of alcohol she supposed.

He smiled at her and she growled at him, even though she was so tired she could barely speak.

Harry grumbled. "Friend? What makes you think I'm your friend?"

And they started up the stairs.

Along the weeks and years that followed, the makeshift crew of the Starship Voyager formed a family. Friendships were made and strengthened. They had their share of bumps too. And plenty of unexpected happenings, not least the rocky friendship between two old acquaintances.

But then that's another story.

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Fin~

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End  
file.